

Sermon on Luke 16:19-31
19th Sunday after Pentecost, September 25, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

So this morning I ask the question of the hour: *who among you wishes to be rich?* After the reading you just heard, maybe some of you have changed your answer! But isn't it the *American Dream* to seek your fortune in this great land, to one day become rich, through your own hard work and "ingenuity"? I do know that there are many people in this country, young and old, who have the hope and expectation that they can, indeed, make their fortune. There are people in other countries who desire greatly to come here to America, where they have heard that the "streets are paved with gold". Some people even look with longing at the mansions of the rich and famous and say to themselves "I want a house like that." It's not a great leap to conclude that God blesses those who are faithful and obedient with material blessings – sometimes called "the prosperity gospel" or *the gospel of wealth* – a heretical teaching that has many followers today.

However, the truth is, I don't know if any of you – or I – or anyone we know will ever become wealthy (unless by some twist of fate you win the lottery). In fact, even our own children are less likely to be as "well off" as you or me in their lives, because of the challenges of our economy and a changing world. For some, this knowledge has become a cause of great distress, especially if one is white, because our expectation in America has always been that our economy will grow, and our children will be better off than we are. To admit the contrary is a suggestion that we have failed, as a nation as a parents. For some, this has been cause for a political backlash, as we see in the present presidential campaign. It's really about fear of the future, for those who may have placed their hopes in an assumed increase in material gain for themselves and the next generation.

So what does scripture say about this matter? In the first lesson, we hear how the prophet Amos criticizes the "idle" rich who feel secure, lie on beds of ivory and lounge on couches, eat lamb and veal, sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, drink wine from bowls and anoint themselves with fine oils. But they do not grieve when the country around them goes into ruin and other people suffer – so they will be the first to go into exile when their country falls, Amos says.

Last Sunday, Jesus told a parable about a dishonest manager, in which he said "*No one can serve two masters...you cannot serve God and wealth.*" Today Jesus tells another parable, contrasting a rich man who dressed in fine purple linen and feasted sumptuously every day. At his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table. Eventually, both the rich man and Lazarus died. Lazarus

went to “heaven”, carried up by the angels to be with Father Abraham, and the rich man to Hades, the place of the dead, tormented by the flames. A great chasm was between them, greater than any chasm that had existed between rich and poor on earth, which neither could cross.

This story kind of reminds us of Charles Dickens’ famous short story *The Christmas Carol*. Remember Ebenezer Scrooge, and how unmoved he was by the human suffering around him, even poor children like Tiny Tim? But in the visit of the third spirit in his dream, he was shown a gravestone with his name on it. He asked the spirit if this was “what will be, or what might be?” This and the other spirits who visited him in this very vivid dream gave him a warning that his greed and lack of caring about others was not only causing others to suffer and die; it was also killing him and his soul. So this dream was the warning that made Ebenezer Scrooge literally “wake up” and turn his life around. Instead of saying “Bah, humbug” to Christmas and ignoring pleas for charity, Ebenezer Scrooge became known for how he celebrated Christmas well, and for his great generosity to others. Could it be that Charles Dickens may have gotten the idea for his story about Scrooge’s conversion from parables and lessons like this one in the Bible that Jesus told? Was this parable about an uncaring rich man and the suffering of poor Lazarus at his gate, and the fate that awaited him when he died, a warning not only for the rich man but for all of us, to notice the suffering of others, to see them and to respond with loving mercy and generosity for those who live in poverty? In the parable it is a matter of life and death, it is a matter of the salvation of the rich man’s soul. Perhaps it is a warning to each one of us who seeks to follow Jesus, and obey the commandment to love.....I think that’s very likely!

So what does this all mean? Remember, a parable is a story, not historical fact, a story told to make a point. Here it is about the sin of the rich man and the suffering of poor Lazarus, and the great reversal of their respective fortune after they died. It is a warning to all of us to not be selfish with our possessions, to notice the suffering of others, and to use the gifts of God which we have received and share them for the common good. It is supposed to get our attention!

But it is not a blanket condemnation of those who are wealthy. It is no sin to be “rich” – just as it is no sin to be poor! In ancient biblical days, the common belief was that to be rich was a sign of God’s blessing for your faithfulness, and to be poor was a sign of condemnation for your sins. Jesus stood this belief on its head, as he ate with tax collectors and sinners, and forgave the sins of those whom the community condemned, reaching out to outcasts. And in this parable, a rich man who lived in luxury was condemned to hell and a poor man at his doorstep went to heaven. Why? How could this be? It was so unexpected, even shocking – a point we miss when we read this today.

So, what was the sin of the rich man, if not for being rich? It seems clear that it was the sin of *not seeing Lazarus* who sat at his very door, and not noticing his hunger and suffering. He ignored his pain, and did nothing for his suffering, while he himself lived in luxury inside his house

Now, is this merely a parable of judgment and condemnation? Where is the grace in this story, Jesus? Is there a “way out” for the rich man, a way for him to receive mercy and forgiveness for his sin of not seeing poor Lazarus, or helping him when he had the ability? In the story, Jesus told how Abraham said that the rich man and his brothers should listen to Moses and the prophets, who told them to be aware and care for the suffering, starving poor. The rich man in Hades told Abraham that if someone from the dead warned his brothers, they would repent. But Abraham said, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone rises from the dead!” That is certainly a stern warning for those who are rich and unseeing.

I think the grace in this parable is in the *warning* given to those who are rich, and to you and me, when we do not see the suffering around us, or avert our eyes from their pain.

So who is invisible to you and me? Where is the warning for us? We must all confess that there are individuals – mostly men - who stand at the intersections of freeways – for example, a mere block away at the Dale Street bridge over I-94. They hold up cardboard signs which say “*Anything Helps*”. It gets easier for each of us to look away and drive on, the more we get accustomed to their presence. But even more disturbing are the families that live in poverty, especially children, who often are invisible to us and to legislators. Last week I shared the number of 165,000 children who live in poverty in our own state of Minnesota, according to the Children’s Defense Fund. Who are they? Where do they live? 40% of African American Children live in poverty today in Minnesota, and 28 % of Native Americans – some in the Twin Cities, many on Minnesota’s Indian reservations. There are homeless men and women wandering the streets of St. Paul all year round, many dealing with mental illness, addiction or depression, veterans suffering from post traumatic stress, teens who have run away from home and suffer from abuse, families living out of their cars because they cannot afford a place to live. Sometimes they dare to enter the church to ask for help, but mostly they remain invisible to the people around them. There are also too many human beings who have lost their homes to mortgage foreclosure, lost their jobs to downsizing or the moving of their companies overseas, lack adequate health insurance, are left bankrupt or homeless by pay day loans, or work for minimum wage. They are mostly invisible because they are working multiple jobs. And they surely are invisible to legislators, who ignore their plight and focus on cutting taxes for the already wealthy or building billion dollar stadiums for the NFL and

the owners of professional sports franchises— who are NEVER INVISIBLE at the state capitol, I assure you!

Now, Jesus ends his parable with Abraham's point, that if the rich do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they won't listen when someone even rises from the dead – such as.....Jesus! So Jesus, in his telling, didn't offer a "way out" for those who want to change the ending. That came later, on the cross!

But as we read in our second lesson, Paul did offer the way of faith, in his letter to Timothy. He said, *"As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life."* (1 Tim. 6:6-19)

For the parable Jesus told, though he made reference to heaven and hell, is not really about the consequences of our sins for the afterlife. That was mostly to get our attention! Jesus was really focusing on what *the transformed life of faith means for daily living!* It is a call to all the baptized, to all who follow Jesus, in how to live each day with love for God and neighbor. In Luke's gospel, eternal life isn't a distant reality called an "afterlife", but it is the life that begins right now - in baptism – and is that abundant life which God promises, that we might embrace it and share it each and every day! It begins each day with our confession, for those times when we have been blind or oblivious to the suffering of others, which leads to repentance and forgiveness, and the transformation of our lives and of the Church.

So let's hear again the apostle Paul's call to us in his letter to Timothy, as he said: *"If we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains...But as for you,[child] of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses."* Thus you and I may *store up for ourselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that we may take hold of the life that really is life."*

Thanks be to God for offering this life to us all! Amen.